

Rudolf Noll, *Unbekannte Briefe der rheinischen Altertumsfreundin Sybille Mertens-Schaaffhausen*. Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse, Sitzungsberichte, 450. Band. Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Wien 1985. 62 pages, 4 plates.

Nineteen hitherto unknown letters by a celebrated woman collector are bound to be of interest at a time when much research is devoted to the history of collecting on the one hand, and feminist studies on the other. Sybille Mertens-Schaaffhausen, whose activities have been described as 'sensationally unfeminine' for her day, addressed these letters, unearthed in the archives of the Kunsthistorisches Museum and now supplied with meticulous notes, to the Austrian scholar Anton Steinbüchel von Rheinwall; his replies were published in the voluminous 'Briefe an Sybille Mertens-Schaaffhausen' in 1974: a brief concordance with these fifteen letters would have been a welcome addition.

The correspondence began in June 1839, during an extended visit to the Rhineland by von Steinbüchel, who was at that time director of the Vienna Cabinet of Coins and Antiquities and professor of Ancient History and Numismatics at the university. He took the initiative in a (lost) note recalling an earlier acquaintance, most probably on the occasion of his cataloguing (not mentioned here) of the coins of Kanonikus Wallraf, a close friend of the Schaaffhausen family.

The approach came at an opportune moment, for Sybille Mertens-Schaaffhausen had just acquired the cabinet of engraved gems collected by Paulus von Praun in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. She seized with both hands the opportunity of consulting von Steinbüchel – whose letter may, of course, have been stimulated by local rumours of the purchase – and invited him to view her collection. This had previously numbered about one hundred stones, but was now vastly enriched, not only in quantity but in importance, by the Praun gems, numbering over one thousand. Overwhelmed by the sight of what was now 'the sovereign of Rhineland gem collections', von Steinbüchel made the generous offer to re-order and re-catalogue it. This was gratefully received, as well it might; for both thought the late 18th century Praun catalogue published by Christoph Gottlieb von Murr inadequate. Von Steinbüchel evidently completed this considerable task before he left the Rhineland at the end of the year. The remaining letters, extending fitfully over seven-and-a-half years, are largely concerned with the owner's abortive desire to publish this catalogue in an extended form. To this end, she sent him a copy of his manuscript, to which he added further notes and eventually an introduction, all extant in the Vienna archives; why they were not transmitted to the collector and published in her lifetime, remains obscure.

The editor suggests that the whole story formed a tragic chapter in the formidable Sybille Mertens-Schaaffhausen's life, whom he sees as the victim of a dilatory scholar's procrastination. He lays the blame entirely on von Steinbüchel whom he taxes with coldheartedness, and whose résumé of the affair, appended to the Vienna notes, he describes as 'ein klassisches Beispiel für die Verdrängung eines Schuldkomplexes'. On any objective reading of both sides of the correspondence, this view seems, to say the least, exaggerated.

To be sure, von Steinbüchel took his time over completing the introduction, which was apparently to be wideranging and to embody his accumulated knowledge of engraved gems. Such a survey by the scholar who had had in his care the magnificent Habsburg collection was indeed worth waiting for; but Sybille

Mertens-Schaaffhausen had his MS notes in hand, was in touch with numerous other scholars, among them L. J. F. Janssen, the Director of the Leyden Cabinet, and Eduard Gerhard who published a number of her gems in *'Zeitschrift des Vereins von Alterthumsfreunden im Rheinlande'*. One may, moreover, ask, on the evidence of her own increasingly complex and confident contributions to that journal, why she did not publish a catalogue herself, based on von Steinbüchel's notes, a task of which she seems to have been perfectly capable.

The reasons must have been more complex. For one thing, the collection von Steinbüchel saw in 1839 was far from definitive, for Sybille Mertens-Schaaffhausen made constant changes. There were considerable additions through the years, many of them made years later in Rome, and equally many de-accessions, thus incidentally dispersing as much as half of the original Praun collection. Her very last recorded letter to the cataloguer, after a virtual gap of three years, speaks of an additional 240 gems and 150 ancient pastes.

Perhaps even more serious were the changes of domicile and the considerable vicissitudes which afflicted the two correspondents while these plans were in the air. Von Steinbüchel, the victim – not wholly innocent – of one of those intrigues which have frequently bedevilled Austrian bureaucracy in the administration of the arts, was dismissed from his posts in 1840 and went to live in Venice (it is ironic that his papers eventually found a repository at the Kunsthistorisches Museum). Meanwhile his would-be patroness, plagued by illness and, after her husband's death, by serious quarrels with her family over the inheritance, allowed two-and-a-half years to elapse before continuing the correspondence. Her last letter, of November 1847, in which she talks blithely of details of the project, also tells him that she had only just been able to buy back part of her collections – in fact her coins and gems, together with her library. These were possibly her favourites, but certainly the most portable, as she, too, intended to move permanently to Italy. But her means were clearly no longer as lavish as they had been during the lifetime of her husband, whose supportive role in a loveless marriage has been given less than its due. Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, at any rate, blamed Sybille for her neglect of Louis Mertens and sharply pointed out that it was *he* who had bought the collection for her, as we know he presented her with other objects and, we learn from an incidental note by the editor, carried on his own correspondence with von Steinbüchel.

Be that as it may, the principal interest of this slim volume lies in the light it sheds, not only on Sybille Mertens-Schaaffhausen as a collector, but on the attitudes which could lead to the breaking up of the important Praun collection, originally assembled by a lover and collector of works of art who lived on intimate terms with great artists and connoisseurs of the late Renaissance period.

The decision to acquire the Praun gems (which appear to have been on the market, at a price only a supremely wealthy buyer could afford, for quite some time) was prompted by Sybille Mertens-Schaaffhausen's fatherly adviser Eduard d'Alton, whose death in 1840 probably made her all the more anxious for von Steinbüchel's support. Yet she set about dismantling the Praun collection quite soon. Should one read von Steinbüchel's approval in his words *'je mehrere von diesen man davon ausschließt, um so mehr tritt das Verdienst dieser einen Reihenfolge hervor'*, which he wrote immediately after seeing it? She would hardly have embarked on such an undertaking without his advice, which, in the spirit of the age, presumably disparaged 'modern', i.e. Renaissance gems, and valued almost exclusively ancient stones. No doubt numerous Praun gems, considered ancient by von Murr, were relegated to the despised modern category. To those that she decided to retain, she later added the few cylinder seals and the group of gnostic gems from the collection and even 'two fine Cinquecento cameos': Murr had only listed five renaissance cameos, though there were probably others among the seventy-five he considered ancient; in fact, none of these figured in Sybille Mertens-Schaaffhausen's posthumous sale. On the other hand, she accepted as ancient the showy *'Alexandrine Divinites'*, now considered a fake; and one may feel equally sceptical about No. 525 in her sale catalogue (Praun 458), a large double-sided lapis lazuli, depicting Apollo flanked by Venus and Eros, with a 'contemporary' portrait of Alexander the Great as Jupiter Ammon on the reverse.

From a reference, quoted on pp. 6–7, to some of von Steinbüchel's notes – *'Sehr schlecht – entsetzlich schlecht – roher Entwurf – ganz rohe Arbeit'* – one may conclude that there were gems from provincial workshops among the Praun gems as well as the local finds from her own collection: in fact his MS summary, transcribed on p. 48, reveals that he had made interesting observations, 'quite new and definitely worth developing', on the differing varieties of provincial work from the Rhineland and from Dalmatian sources respectively. The importance of Roman provincial workshops is now clearly recognised and in this

field von Steinbüchel has found current successors (see e.g. M. HENIG's *Corpus of Roman Engraved Gemstones from British Sites* [1974]), S. MIDDLETON's forthcoming publication on Arthur Evan's Dalmatian gems, and, in our context of particular interest, G. PLATZ-HORSTER, *Die antiken Gemmen im Rheinischen Landesmuseum Bonn* (1984), and her forthcoming publication of gems from Xanten.

Although the Mertens-Schaaffhausen sale included gems from Xanten, it is not yet clear whether she eventually disposed of those considered 'sehr schlecht' on grounds of quality. The suggestion that she got rid of 'Dubletten', as though they were coins, is patently absurd. Only von Steinbüchel's MS catalogue in Vienna of her collection as it stood in 1839 can throw a real light on the criteria which led to its first dismantling with von Steinbüchel's approval. Much may have been lost later, when, as her Roman purchases prove, she was poorly advised or followed her own judgment, not nearly as secure in the matter of gems as in coins. Though she had originally stated her intention not to buy in Rome or Naples, as she did not feel competent to spot fakes, and confine her collecting to Genoa and Venice (thereby showing a touching faith in this venerable factory of fakes and forgeries), Rome is in fact given as provenance for many of her later additions, including a number of 'ancient rubies' (her earlier collection had been mineralogically examined by Johann Jakob Noeggerath).

A. BERNHARD-WALCHER's valuable 'Nachtrag' (pp. 49–54) attempts a preliminary sketch of the later history of the Mertens-Schaaffhausen gems. On their first sale in 1859 he simply repeats the information given in Houben's biography, incidentally copying the nonsensical 'Hascomb Reetry' as the original purchaser's address. The Revd. Gregory Rhodes was, in fact, an important collector, a gentleman of means, who had been ordained in 1836, but, apart from two curacies – neither of them at Hascomb – lived unbeneficed in various English towns (Brighton, according to Crockford in 1860, and London from 1855 to his presumed death in 1882). He may have rented Hascomb Rectory at the time of his purchase, or visited the then Rector. The subsequent purchaser, George Eastwood, was a dealer, through whose hands quantities of stones must have passed, and it is idle to try to connect the jasper he donated to the British Museum with the Mertens-Schaaffhausen collection.

Bernhard-Walcher's concordance of twenty-nine Mertens-Schaaffhausen gems with their present locations in public collections, with an indication of the routes by which they were acquired, is a useful step towards tracing the fate of her collection; he seems only to have overlooked the fact that his 'unidentifiable' No. 28 (Walters 3675) is identical with Mertens-Schaaffhausen No. 1750. The reason why gems 25–27 and 29 on his list, which also came to the British Museum via Castellani with a Mertens-Schaaffhausen provenance, do not show up in the Sale catalogue, is not far to seek, as they are more likely to have been bought or exchanged by the Castellani brothers in Rome itself than bought after her death. Their father, Fortunato Pio, is hardly adequately described, though, as 'a well-known Italian faker of jewellery'!

The statement that this is only a 'Vorbericht' is to be welcomed, for one may hope that a detailed investigation of von Steinbüchel's MSS in Vienna will lead to further discoveries about the fate of Sybille Mertens-Schaaffhausen's gems after their dispersal. This was, in the editor's words, occasioned through the 'Unverständnis, Habgier und Pietätlosigkeit' of her heirs, for whose financial straits he shows little sympathy. He wastes no words either on the dismantling of the far more important Praun collection which she ruthlessly set in motion – a much greater disaster, one might think, in which she only too obviously followed the dictates of contemporary fashion.

This publication, slight as it is in volume, thus not only offers evidence that interest in Sybille Mertens-Schaaffhausen is lively beyond her own Rhineland and the Romano-German archaeological circles in which she took such interest in her day; it is also an important pointer to fields yet to be explored towards the history of gem-collecting in which much remains to be done.